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McFarlane gets testy, lambastes Hill inquisitors

By Mary Belcher
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Former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane dropped his stoic facade before the Iran-Contra investigative committee yesterday, delivering tirades on dealing with terrorism and on inquisitors who "don't have the patience to study the facts."

The committee for a second day explored the close relationship between former Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, who died last week, and Lt. Col. Oliver North, who was nominally under the national security adviser's command.

Mr. McFarlane said he believed Mr. Casey was instructing Col. North in the Iran arms sales and aid to the Nicaraguan resistance.

But Mr. McFarlane repeatedly said he accepted full blame for all the mistakes that were made in the affair.

"I ought to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law and put away," said Mr. McFarlane, who resigned as President Reagan's national security adviser in December 1985.

Since Monday, Mr. McFarlane has answered a stream of difficult questions from the special panel, speaking in a deep monotone, guarding his words carefully.

But Sen. Warren Rudman, New Hampshire Republican, apparently pushed too far. He asked Mr. McFarlane about a June 1985 plan to rescue American hostages in Beirut using ransom payments funded by H. Ross Perot and delivered by Drug Enforcement Administration agents.

After establishing that Congress was not notified about the rescue plan, Mr. Rudman

asked Mr. McFarlane to explain why it wasn't.

"I will," Mr. McFarlane answered, his voice shaking with anger.

"It is more than passing strange to me that we cannot aspire to a policy which is more effective to deal with terrorism.

"Now it is undeniable that some countries are good at it, and they are good because terrorists know that

whenever they commit terrorism against Israel, something, somehow, somewhere is going to happen.

"Now it may not always be arms, it may not be pre-emptive attack. It may be negotiating, it may be bribing. But you can be goddamn sure if any Israeli's caught, he's going to have his government going after the people who did it," he said.

When Mr. Rudman ventured again to find out why Congress was not notified of the top-secret plan, Mr. McFarlane said, "The kind of activity the DEA people undertook normally would also fit the description of activities the CIA undertakes, or the FBI, or the Army, on occasion, with specially trained units. None of these others operate to report to the Congress."

Mr. McFarlane withstood even more intense fire from Sen. George Mitchell, Maine Democrat. He suggested that the former national security adviser obstructed justice by failing to stop Col. North from shredding key documents in the Iran-Contra affair, and by helping White House aides prepare a false chronology of events in the episode to distance the president from it.

"The tactic of assuming general responsibility while denying any responsibility for specific events is not uncommon," Mr. Mitchell said. "No penalty attaches to someone with general responsibility; we all know specific penalties do attach for specific events."

In later questioning, Mr. McFarlane apologized several times for his earlier "outburst." But he said, "People don't volunteer to work for the government for the wonderful wages and occasionally to get shot at and spend 30 years doing that so they can be ridiculed by someone who

hasn't got the patience to study the facts. . . .

"We want people to come into this government who feel they do what they believe is the right thing to do. They're not going to be scandalized, pretty close to the edge," he said.

Implications of a White House cover-up of the Iran-Contra affair simmered throughout the hearing.

Rep. Peter Rodino, New Jersey Democrat, asked Mr. McFarlane about a cryptic reference he made to the Watergate scandal in a November 1986 note to then-National Security Adviser Adm. John Poindexter, after news of the Iran arms sales surfaced.

"I lived through Watergate, John," Mr. McFarlane wrote. "Well-meaning people who were in on the early planning of the communications strategy didn't intend to lie, but ultimately came around to it."

Mr. McFarlane explained that he was encouraging Adm. Poindexter to "get the whole thing out."

After the Iran-Contra connection was exposed in late November, Adm. Poindexter resigned and Col. North was fired from the National Security Council staff.

"I listen to you and I recognize, if you forgive me for saying, how really torn you appear to me in wanting to say it all and, because you are a person who is indeed patriotic, who

feels deeply, and somehow or other we come to the point even you have had to compromise your statements and have said, 'I said it up to a point, but I don't know,' " said Mr. Rodino, who chaired the House Judiciary Committee during impeachment proceedings against President Richard Nixon.

In the past three days, Mr. McFarlane frequently has said he was unaware of certain actions Col. North took on the Iran-Contra matter while the colonel was under his supervision.

"There is nothing North did for which I don't feel responsible," Mr. McFarlane said. "And I don't even know today what all that is."

On Tuesday, however, Mr. McFarlane acknowledged that Col. North was not truly under his control and that his former subordinate had "unusual" access to Mr. Casey.

Sen. William Cohen, Maine Republican, yesterday asked, "Have you ever suspected that Oliver North was taking instructions not from you but from the DCI [Mr. Casey]?"

"Yes," Mr. McFarlane said. "I became aware in the fall of 1985 that Ollie was having more contact than I realized with the director. And he mentioned — and I think it was entirely off-handed and intended comically — at one point that the director had volunteered a million dollars. And he laughed, and I think it probably was comic."

"But it was expressive of a relationship that surprised me," he said.

"Do you feel that perhaps Casey was giving him instructions on how to conduct this particular operation with respect to Nicaragua or Iran?"

Mr. Cohen asked.

"I think so," Mr. McFarlane answered.

Mr. McFarlane, who testified before the committee voluntarily, often couched his responses in obscure terms.

When he was asked about the risky mission he took on the president's behalf to Tehran in May 1986, Mr. McFarlane made a veiled reference to reported suicide plans he made in case he was kidnapped. "I had the means to foreclose the possibility of my being exploited," he said.

Mr. McFarlane, 49, in February attempted suicide after wrestling with his role in the Iran-Contra affair.